

## DYING ON THE SIDE OF PALESTINIANS

Ramzy Baroud

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“Ramzy, I must admit it, it’s so hard being a Palestinian these days.” That’s how a friend of mine, a dedicated individual who is spending her days and years advocating justice for the Palestinian people, ended a distressing message to me a few months back. I recall her words often, and as often I recall my grandfather who died in a refugee camp’s mud home, away from his village and land.

My grandpa believed that being a Palestinian was a blessing. “You cannot be entrusted to defend a more virtuous cause than the cause of Palestine, unless Allah has blessed you greatly,” he once told me.

I often wondered what kept the old man going. He lost his home and the pride of his life, his land, and was forced at gunpoint to haul his family away and leave the village of Beit Daras where they once lived happily. He spent the rest of his life, getting old and tired in a refugee camp, for many years in a tent, then in a mud house subsidized by the United Nations. He died there, next to a transistor radio.

Grandpa’s radio was once green, yet its color faded to white somehow. It was battered, and covered with duct tape, just enough to keep it whole. The old man cared little for the look of the radio. All that mattered was that the radio managed to broadcast the news. The “Voice of London” (in Arabic), the “Middle East Radio” or the “Voice of the Arabs” were constantly on. At night he tucked the radio beside him and went to bed, to start his next morning by the latest news.

He fancied that one of these days the radio would declare that Palestinian refugees were allowed to go back home. He carried that fantasy until he died, at the age of ninety-five, decades after he was forced out of Palestine.

We would see Grandpa walking toward the radio briskly from the kitchen, or waking up abruptly from an afternoon nap, fervently asking, while pointing at the radio: “Did they just say something about refugees?”

“No, Grandpa, they haven't,” one of us would reply with a juvenile smile. He would return back to his chore, carrying the weight of many years, and his unending hope.

But Grandpa died a few years before the start of the Palestinian uprising of 1987. He was too old to walk, to argue with Grandma for not feeding the

chickens on time, or to converse with an ailing neighbor. But never too old to hold his little radio, lovingly, with a final desperate hope that the long awaited news segment about his return to his village would be declared.

When Grandpa gasped his last breath, all of his friends and family stood by, muttering verses from the *Quran* as many tears were shed that day. I, too, stood near to him, frightened of confronting my first experience with death. He made it easy on me, as he had a smile on his face, and near him was a radio with the volume lowered but never muted.

The year of his death was a year that many older refugees also passed away. They were buried in a graveyard surrounded by the graves of younger refugees, mostly martyrs who fell throughout the years.

I wish I could have managed to keep Grandpa's old radio. I haven't. But when I left my refugee camp, I did manage to smuggle many memories, his undying hope, and his pride of being a Palestinian.

Very often, and now more than ever, I recall the words of my friend about how difficult it is being a Palestinian these days. I recall it with every Palestinian child killed or home demolished, with every speech that President Bush makes outlining his visionless vision of the Middle East; I recalled it when a Brussels' court denied Palestinians the right to try Ariel Sharon for his massacres in Lebanon; I recalled it when a Dutch officer held me for a long time delaying the entire flight while investigating me for the mere fact that I was born in Gaza; I recall it when I read the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post*; I recalled it when my father talks to me on the phone just to tell me that the Israelis are bombing his neighborhood; I recall it not every day, but every hour.

But I also recall my grandpa's words: "You cannot be entrusted to defend a more virtuous cause than the cause of Palestine, unless Allah has blessed you greatly."

I often wondered why old, dispossessed, and ailing Grandpa died in a mud house with a smile on his face. We will all die one day, rich and poor, citizens and stateless, Palestinians or Israelis, Presidents or refugees. It's that final and decisive moment, when Grandpa gasped his last breath that counts. He lived a hard life, a refugee, with his dearest possession, a battered transistor radio. But he died a Palestinian who never compromised on his rights. He died proud, with a smile, leaving us with nothing but a transistor and an abundance of hope.

Grandpa never returned to his village of Beit Daras, but I know that one day my children will.

10/14/1973

Nitza Danieli Horner

*Nitza Danieli Horner is a sculptor and faculty member at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 92nd Street Y and PACT. Born in Israel to Dina and Ely Danieli and brothers Yoram and Yoav. Nitza is a seventh generation Israeli. In 1984 she moved to the states where she married Tim Horner, a talented jazz drummer, and had a son.*

A memory has a taste. Mine makes my mouth dry:

I had a dream. No. A nightmare. Floor covered with blood. Many oh, so many sad eyes. My brother lies dead, white as can be, his eyes open, staring at me. I woke up sweating and ran to Yoav's room: "Be careful! You are about die!"

He turned over, smiled and said: "Go to bed, get some sleep. An old lady read my palm the other day. A bright future is waiting for me." Bright indeed.

Fourteen was my age and that number that forever became my fortune.

10/14/1973, ninth grade. The person who opened the classroom door asked me out. Hooray! That room down the hall felt wrong. My brother's old teacher, Mrs. Tzur, stood by the door: "Where is your brother?" she asked. At the front, I thought. The war! I forgot.

"What happened to Yoram?" I whispered. "Is he OK?"

"It's Yoav. He is dead. Your parents don't know. You can't cry. Let's get your things."

That's when her finger started pointing – threatening and cold. It felt like it was starting to grow. I struggled with tears. "They must not find out that he is dead till we get to the hospital! The doctors must tell them just in case they collapse!" That was what she said as she continued to rape my youth with her ignorance.

I choked and followed her out. Someone came with my things. We went home and for four hours waited for my parents. My father came first, then my mom. We ran to the car with the finger holding on to my arm. My father was driving, his hair getting thin, grinding his teeth, holding tight to the wheel.

Not a peaceful silence. I feel the chill in the cabin. The tick of her finger continues to threaten me. My precious mom, trembling, hugging me. "He may lose his arm Nitz, but I'm sure he'll be fine. They say he's alive, we'll be alright!!"

I said nothing. I can smell my mom's sweat, feel her fear and her heart beating . . . I move closer to her and we embrace . . . . How I wished I wasn't here.

I remember the smell of blood. I want to say "sweet," but it was not a sweet moment. Anticipation. Almost as if waiting for my parents to find out so that life may return to normal.

I smell Mrs. Tzur's breath behind my back, see her finger shaking. Tick tock, tick tock. "Tzur" means "granite" in Hebrew. Cold. Hard. Her authority is drying my youth.

A memory has sounds. Mine not much. As I was sunk in a plastic chair, I kept my head pointing down, trying to avoid seeing the blood. That room was identical to my nightmare. Can fear make a sound?

I am sitting alone. My parents are lost in the ER. Lots of feet rushing by, making wet sounds, stamping their way. White was not pure for me that day; it could not clean that wet, red space. Can white make a sound? There was a great sound of rush. Voices calling doctor after doctor, people crying, people finding loved ones alive. I think of the nurses. How can they prioritize such extremes?

Help me.

A cry, heavy breathing. Is it me? Why do they all want to work here? I must be dreaming! I stretch, thinking of her salt and pepper hair infecting my wound. She looks small, but her finger continues to grow.

I had always wanted to go back to that waiting room and see if it was like my father's chair, which shrunk as I grew.

Squeaking stretchers carrying breathing bodies, how many mothers are crying? How many more men are willing to continue fighting? "Here he is!!!!" my father yells. I look and see his curly hair on a stretcher! A big round hole where his arm used to be. "You liar!" I scream. "He's alive!!! YOAV!!!!"

Our hope erases. It's not him.

I pretend that I am not part of all this. I block. I'm a rock. Oh, no. Here comes my dad, punching his fist into his palm. He is looking so frail and sad. He must know that Yoav will forever be eighteen years old.

Don't remember where my mom was or if I am ever to see Mrs. Tzur again. I can hear the loud silence in the car. The neighbors all waiting outside. How did they find out?

I miss you Yoav. I cannot remember the sound of your voice or the smell of your hair after a shower. I remember our giggles and long talks and swimming across the Sea of Galilee together. Did you fall in love? Did you kiss? What was your biggest dream? Time is supposed to heal. One, two, three, four . . . It's been almost thirty years.

Don't remember much more. I was in shock. I could not cry and let go; there was no one to lean on. That rocking finger was constantly on my mind. At home I was a clown. My parents' grief appeared to be so strong I felt I would add to it if I shared my own. They felt so guilty they fought. I hid my pain and told many jokes. What else could I do?

Three years without crying went by. A young girl in a light blue school shirt sits by her brother's grave talking to marble. Just sat there, and spoke with him. Got used to the bus route and faked notes to school. Looking at the sea of tombstones, I saw images emerge from the marble. I guess that was when sculpture turned to me and said: "Do me, explore, inside are the answers." So I did.

My boyfriend one day lifted his hand, smacked my face, tired of the twitch in my eye or so he said. . . He went on and described how the teeth of

death bit my dead brother's face, eyes, body and feet. Surprised and humiliated I dumped the offender and ran away, hating him for daring to say that. I cried for so long my eyes would not open. I cried till healing came and took over.

The chisel, the clay; the travel, the play; places with no war. I ended up in New York! A place full of life, individuality and art. I settled and married, gave life to my son. Picked a place where he wouldn't have to run. At least I hope so .

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## A FAIRY TALE

Allon Pratt

*Allon Pratt, a seventh generation Sabra (Israeli born), was a kibbutz member in the Negev Desert for twenty years . As a teacher and father of five, Allon returned to the university to earn another degree in Arabic language and culture as part of his effort to communicate and bridge gaps between Arabs and Jews. Since 1998 he has lived in self-imposed exile in the USA.*

More than one hundred years ago, my grandfather, Sabba Gad, grew up in the old city of Jerusalem. His best friend was Amin al-Husseini. They were very naughty as kids. One night they played a trick on the whole town: they met halfway between the Jewish quarter and the Muslim quarter and together they switched all the signs in town. The midwife became the cobbler, the butcher turned into the Mohel. You can imagine the confusion and anger that filled the town the next morning, when a very pregnant woman walked into the cobbler's shop and a baby ready for circumcision was brought to the butcher's store... The two kids were scared and ran away to hide in a safe haven. My Sabba Gad hid behind the curtain of the ark in his neighborhood synagogue, and Amin, his friend ran to hide in the mosque of his quarter. It so happened that the Rabbi was my grandfather's father, and the Kaddi in the mosque was Amin's father. Both fathers figured out that their kids had collaborated in that mischief and took their sons, respectively, towards each other. They met halfway between the Jewish and Muslim quarters and had a "serious talk". The kids were not punished but rather they promised never to do to others what they did not want done to themselves. As they were looking up to their fathers and making their promise, the Rabbi and the Kaddi with their beards and shining eyes and noble looks, seemed to them to look like the prophet Elijah, the Messiah, and their mutual promise became an unspoken covenant, that was enhanced by the sound of flutes and drums coming from the alleys of the old city of Jerusalem.

Years later, my mother grew up in the budding small coastal town of Haifa. Her best friend was Jamilla, the daughter of their Arab neighbors. Together they went swimming in the sea, or wandering through the market, or hiking in the ravines and slopes of Mount Carmel. Once on a vacation day, they went via the market, to get supplies for a day of hiking. They bought nuts and raisins and almonds and figs and carobs and set forth to the mountain. They reached the peak of Mount Carmel, where there is a statue of the prophet Elijah. Jamilla whispered into my mom's ear that a tradition in her family says that if you squint your eyes in front of the statue, and look carefully into the eyes of Elijah, they start to shine and move and smile at you. And that would be the perfect moment to make a wish. Both Jamilla and my mom did just that: They squinted at Elijah, and his eyes moved and smiled back, and they whispered a silent covenant which was reaffirmed by the sounds of music coming from the market of Haifa.

And again, years later, growing up in Israel, I had a Bar-Mitzvah project to do in school: "My Neighbors." I teamed with a Druze boy from a near-by village. Wallid was a very hospitable, smart, and fun-filled kid. As a matter of fact, our families became very friendly. They would visit us at home, bringing fruit from their orchard, and we would visit them in their village, bringing vegetables from our patch. We would have sleepovers at each other's homes and visit each other's classrooms. Once, while picnicking near Wallid's village, we wandered off into the woods, and arrived at the foot of the statue of Elijah. I quickly whispered into Wallid's ear that a tradition in my family says that if you squint and look carefully into Elijah's eyes, they start to shine and move and smile back at you, and that would be the perfect moment to make a wish. Both of us did just that: we squinted at Elijah. His eyes moved and smiled back at us; as a matter of fact, it seemed as if his whole body was beginning to come to life and move. And the faint sounds of flutes and drums from the fields of Wallid's village reinforced a silent covenant.

Guess what? Years later, my daughter Gahl is a typical kibbutz girl, growing up out in nature in the dunes of the Negev desert. Her friend is Aziza, a Bedouin girl from a neighboring tribe. They pay each other visits for Haflas at Aziza's tent, or holiday celebrations in our kibbutz. Once, when on an outing to explore ants and insects and gerbils and cacti in bloom, a sudden sand-storm started to twirl around the girls. Somewhere between Gahl's kibbutz and Aziza's tent they huddled, eyes closed, the storm whirling around them. When the twister rolled away, they both confessed to having seen Elijah the prophet go up to the heavens with his chariots of fire. And it was a moment of awe, and a mute covenant with you-know-what music witnessing it.

## GERMANA NIJIM

### E-Mail from Palestine

*Germana wrote thee following e-mail to her sons, Sherif and Faris.*

From: germana nijim  
Sent: Wednesday, May 14, 2003 1:16 PM  
To: Faris Nijim  
Cc: Bro (E-mail)  
Subject: The Making of a Suicide Bomber

Hamed (not his real name) is thirteen. He lives in the very fertile Beqa'a Valley, a half hour drive from Hebron. He has three older sisters. He is the only boy – at thirteen neither a child nor a man.

His land is coveted by Jewish settlers, and his house is marked for demolition by the Israeli government. Soldiers beat on the door of the house one, two, three times per night with the pretext of having to search for weapons. The whole family suffers from sleep deprivation, fear, and anxiety.

Settlers come after dark and throw stones at the house. Most of the windows have been shattered. Seeds are dug out of the earth and scattered. Vines and young olive trees are uprooted.

Hamed is often confined to the house because his parents fear for his safety. His oldest sister was studying at the University of Hebron. Now its doors are welded shut. The second sister was attending the Hebron Polytechnic, but that institution has also been shut down. The third sister, 15 years old, is not planning to go on with her studies. What is the use? she says, looking at her sisters.

A few months ago, Hamed's parents, wanting to give him something he could call his own and make him happy, gave him a puppy. No 13 year old can resist a puppy, and Hamed fell in love with the little creature.

One evening Hamed called and called for his puppy, but he never came home. In the morning he found the little body on his front door riddled with bullet holes.

Hamed went to his room, wailing, screaming, weeping, repeating a phrase over and over and beating his head against the wall. What was he saying? "I want to be a suicide bomber!" His mother had to restrain him from severely injuring himself. She cradled him in her arms and rocked him like a baby.

Since that day, Hamed has refused to go to school. "What is the use?" he says. "Suicide bombers don't need an education." He alternates between being

the right-hand man for his parents, doing chores on the farm, and being the baby curled up on his mother's lap, staring at the wall.

"I am going to be a suicide bomber" he says with conviction, striking terror in the hearts of his parents.